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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides guidelines to produce effective, responsive business letter writing, which promotes public relations, gives plain answers to questions, clearly states requests for additional information, and increases office efficiency and economy. Four major characteristics of such letters are discussed: (1) brevity and the avoidance of needless words and information; (2) the use of plain, everyday language, which means letter writers must possess a thorough understanding of the subject so that they can confidently use nontechnical language in place of specialized terms; (3) strength, which requires the use of concrete, specific words and a logical organization of ideas; and (4) sensitivity, which calls for a human, personal approach. Specific examples of phrases and words to be avoided are included as well as simple paraphrases to substitute for awkward, wordy, or technical terminology. Methods for planning and organizing a business reply are outlined, stressing the importance of its three main components: the opening, which should immediately stimulate the reader's interest; the body, which should contain the progression of thought necessary for a complete answer; and the closing, which should summarize the contents and propose any recommendations. (ELG)

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the way to
BETTER LETTER WRITING

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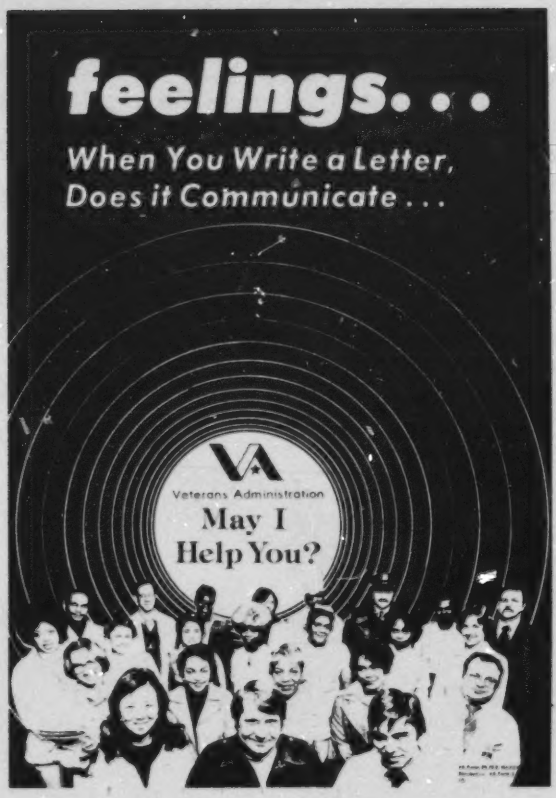

ALL OF OUR LETTERS SHOULD SHOW THAT WE CARE!

They should be sensitive and responsive and written in common sense language.

To achieve this, simply put *yourself* in the other person's place . . . . . practice EMPATHY.

Read your own letters as if you were receiving them, and ask yourself if you would be *pleased* to receive them.

A key point to remember is that the person you're writing to is a human being with *feelings*; not "JUST" a job applicant or "JUST" a veteran.

EVERYONE BENEFITS

If we write letters that we ourselves would like to receive, we can help ------

- Develop better public relations by writing in a more friendly and personal manner.
- Improve service to veterans by giving plain answers to specific questions or by more clearly stating requests for information.
- Increase efficiency and economy. Simple, clear writing will help us to think more clearly; it will enable us to write faster as well as better; and it will cut down on the number of letters we and our correspondents send to each other.

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PRACTICE USING THESE KEY WORDS

You can improve the letters you write by making them:

BRIEF Say no more than needs to be said, and use just enough words to say it . . . clearly, correctly and courteously.

PLAIN Choose a less complicated way of saying something. Remember that the simpler a letter is, the easier it will be to understand.

STRONG Use words that carry an exact picture, rather than weak words that carry a fuzzy picture.

SENSITIVE This element is most important in making your letters courteous and friendly. Use the right tone. The word "tone" means not what you write, but the way you write it.

REMEMBER THESE GUIDELINES

For each key word, there are several guidelines you can use to improve your letters.

BRIEF

. . . . . AVOID NEEDLESS WORDS AND NEEDLESS INFORMATION

Wordy letters are wasteful. They increase the cost of correspondence and reduce the clarity of your message. Some phrases don't serve any purpose and can be omitted, such as:

This is to inform you that . . .

For your information . . .

I wish to advise that . . .

Your attention is invited to the fact that . . .

Other wordy items can be trimmed down.

WORDY	TRIMMED DOWN
You will please find enclosed	Here is
We are in receipt of	We received
We are not in position to	We cannot
We will take steps to	We will
many in number	many
in regard to	about
hold a meeting	meet
in the event that	if

. . . . . DON'T REPEAT WHAT IS SAID IN A LETTER YOU RECEIVE

Why not begin easily and naturally? Answer questions directly without repeating them. This can usually be done. Most veterans don't carry on a great amount of correspondence with the VA and will know exactly what you're talking about when you start immediately with your answer.

BRIEF

For example, suppose somebody wants a copy of pamphlet X. You can write–

"Reference is made to your letter of May 30, in which you request a copy of pamphlet X. The desired pamphlet is temporarily out of print."

But it's shorter and clearer to write–

"We regret that pamphlet X is temporarily out of print."

By getting to the point you are less likely to lose or confuse your reader.

You may have to add additional information. If you get to the point first, your reader will be patient, and you will be more likely to limit your information to what is needed.

..... BEWARE OF ROUNDABOUT PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Most of these phrases can be replaced by a single word or can even be omitted, in some instances.

INSTEAD OF A PHRASE	USE A WORD
on the part of	for
with reference to	on, about
in view of	because, since
in order to	to
for the purpose of	for

..... WATCH OUT FOR NOUNS AND ADJECTIVES THAT DERIVE FROM VERBS

There are some words that derive their noun and adjective forms by adding endings like ING, ION, etc. Take the verb AGREE and the noun form AGREEMENT. We can write WE AGREED, but too often we write WE REACHED AN AGREEMENT. Use the basic verb–it is shorter and clearer.

..... DON'T QUALIFY YOUR STATEMENTS WITH IRREVELANT "IFS."

Many times it is necessary to qualify your letters with "if." If you tell veterans that they have appeal rights, you would also tell what they must do *if* they wish to appeal. Many times, however, the "ifs" are unnecessary. For example, it is an unnecessary caution to write, "This information applies if there are no changes in the law prior to the time you become eligible for benefits."

PLAIN

.... KNOW YOUR SUBJECT WELL SO YOU CAN DISCUSS IT CONFIDENTLY AND NATURALLY

You probably have a specialized language for your work. These specialized words may result from the laws with which you work or they may be peculiar to your profession or occupational group. Often they are simple words which have been given a special meaning.

These words are a form of shorthand and usually carry a precise meaning to the people in your group. To a member of the public, however, they may be meaningless. In a real sense you are the interpreter for the public. You must KNOW YOUR STUFF so well that you can write about it in everyday language.

Here are some of the things you can do to get away from specialized language.

- **STUDY.**

  Study all new laws and rules that you will be called upon to explain. Make sure of their meaning. Don't wait till you get a letter.

- **REPLACE TECHNICAL, SPECIALIZED, OR UNFAMILIAR TERMS WITH SIMPLE EVERY-DAY LANGUAGE.**

  Use words and phrases that are familiar to your readers. THE REFERENCED REGULATION can become THIS REGULATION. Avoid the temptation to carry over into your letters the language of laws and regulations. Throw away HERETO and HEREIN. IN LIEU OF can be changed to IN PLACE OF. PRIOR TO can become BEFORE, and SUBSEQUENT TO may be altered to AFTER.

- **EXPLAIN, DEFINE, OR USE EXAMPLES.**

  There will be instances when you can't avoid technical words. When this happens, explain what they mean, or define them, or use examples to get across your meaning.

- **DON'T QUOTE GOBS OF LAWS, REGULATIONS, AND INSTRUCTIONS.**

  Your readers aren't interested in long stories about Public Law This and That. They want to know whether they do or do not get what they're asking for. There may be times when you *do* have to refer to a certain law or regulation, and you know that your reader isn't familiar with it. Here, you might have to quote and even have to give additional explanations to make your letter complete. Don't quote, however, unless you have to, and don't quote at greater length than you have to.

. . . . . USE SHORT WORDS, SHORT SENTENCES, AND SHORT PARAGRAPHS

Some people have a tendency to use big words. Grand words do not impress your readers. They are more likely to make them angry. In addition, they make writing more difficult to understand.

Think of the way you talk. You don't tell your friends what REMUNERATION you get. You talk about your PAY. You don't ask people where they are DOMICILED. You ask them where they LIVE. Why not do the same thing with your writing?

INSTEAD OF	USE
acquaint	tell
ascertain	ask, learn
communication	letter, memo
inadvertency	error, mistake
modification	change

DON'T throw aside a word JUST because it is long; DO try to think of a shorter word that carries the meaning just as well.

Try to write short sentences. Don't forget that your reader does not have your voice to use as a guide. Pause for breath by using periods. Try to write sentences of not more than 21 words in length, but don't go to the extreme of making them choppy.

Long paragraphs can be broken up easily. Remember that all sentences in a paragraph should relate to a single idea, but that does not mean that all sentences related to one idea must be kept in one paragraph. Try to keep your paragraphs down to an average of not more than seven lines.

BRIEF

This doesn't mean that you will have to count words and lines. Simply look over the page. Do many sentences run over two lines? Do the paragraphs look forbidding?

Don't forget about the importance of meaning. DON'T break up sentences and paragraphs just because they are long; DO break them up if it makes the meaning clearer.

Use all the words you need to carry a message clearly, correctly, and courteously, but no more. Be thrifty but not stingy with words. Don't forget that a short letter—properly worded—can be just as courteous and friendly as a long one.

. . . . . BE COMPACT. DON'T SEPARATE CLOSELY RELATED PARTS OF SENTENCES

The location of a word or group of words can completely change a sentence. For example, would you want to say . . .

"The enclosed booklet explains what the family should do *when the worker dies* to collect insurance."

. . . . . OR

"The enclosed booklet explains what the family should do to collect insurance *when the worker dies.*"

Keep your meaning clear.

. . . . . TIE YOUR THOUGHTS TOGETHER

If you do this, your reader can follow you from one thought to another without getting lost. Your sentences should be put together in a logical manner. In your sentences tie together the parts that are related. Look at the next sentence and see what can happen when related parts are separated.

"They were busy mopping the floor with another employee."
(Wouldn't it have been better if they used a mop?)

STRONG

. . . . . USE CONCRETE, SPECIFIC WORDS

We often use words that have so many meanings that the exact thought is not clear. For example, you could write EXPERIENCE HAS INDICATED THAT THIS PROCEDURE HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL. But it is clearer to write 90 PERCENT OF OUR STATIONS REPORT THAT THIS PROCEDURE HAS REDUCED COSTS BY 10 PERCENT. Watch out for fuzzy use of words like HANDLE, EXPERIENCE, INFREQUENT, COMPARE, and CONSIDERATION. Use concrete, specific words that carry your meaning exactly.

STRONG

. . . . . USE MORE ACTIVE VERBS

Another way to strengthen your letters is to use fewer passive verbs and more active verbs.

Don't write–

It is believed that . . . . . .

Do write–

I believe that . . . . . .

Get rid of the preposition BY, that little friend of the passive verb.
NOT: Your letter was read by the DIRECTOR. BUT: The DIRECTOR read your letter.

. . . . . DON'T EXPLAIN YOUR ANSWER BEFORE GIVING IT

Give your answer; then explain if necessary. Think of your reaction when somebody told you a story and kept adding detail after detail. You probably thought, "When am I going to find out the point of all this?" Keep your readers from thinking this. Whenever possible, get to the point right away; then explain if necessary. You may find out that with this method you don't need as much explanation as you thought. Would you be pleased to learn that "This is in reference to your application." . . . . . or would you rather be told–up front–that "Your application has been approved."?

. . . . . DON'T HEDGE

Many times you cannot write that something can ALWAYS be done or that something is ALWAYS so. You have to use such words as NORMALLY and ORDINARILY. Often, such "hedging" is unavoidable.

However, it can be habit forming so that you begin to place loopholes in a letter when they are not needed. This raises questions in the reader's mind and leads to needless correspondence. Think twice before you weaken your letters with GENERALLY, USUALLY, COMMONLY, or similar hedging statements.

Don't use them unless you really have to.

WHEN YOU ARE WRITING VETERANS, BE SENSITIVE, RESPONSIVE AND BRIEF

SENSITIVE

. . . . . BE HUMAN

An important point in writing friendly and courteous letters is to be human. Use the personal touch.

Here are some of the ways you can do this.

- Use the proper names of the people yo. write about. Write JAMES SMITH and MS. GREEN instead of THE CLAIMANT and THE ABOVE-NAMED VETERAN.
- Use names that stand for human beings: CHILD, WIFE, HUSBAND, and so on.
- Avoid impersonal words. Gain the personal touch by writing I BELIEVE in place of IT IS BELIEVED. If you do have to refer to the agency, use THIS AGENCY RECOMMENDS rather than IT IS RECOMMENDED BY THIS AGENCY.
- Use friendly words that show a desire to be helpful, such as THANK YOU, WE WILL BE GLAD TO, WE APPRECIATE YOUR PROMPTNESS.
- Use personal pronouns. Remember that you're writing to a human being even if you don't meet face-to-face. Use pronouns like YOU, HE and SHE rather than talking about VETERANS and DEPENDENTS. Don't depersonalize yourself either. Write I or WE instead of THIS OFFICE or THIS AGENCY.

. . . . . ADMIT MISTAKES

When we make mistakes, there is a temptation to ignore them, cover them up, or shift the blame. DON'T DO IT!

Such efforts rarely deceive our readers. They are more likely to make them angry and give them a poor opinion of the VA.

If you goof—and we all do on occasion—say so. Then your readers know exactly what has happened. They know that mistakes can happen, and that it is the reliable person or agency which frankly admits them.

After admitting a mistake, tell what has or will be done to correct it. Stress the desire and effort of the VA to improve its service.

. . . . . DON'T OVERWHELM YOUR READER WITH "INTENSIVES" AND "EMPHATICS"

Intensives include adjectives and adverbs like "highest," "deepest," "very much" and so on. When used too freely, they lose their effect. The same caution applies to emphatics which call special attention to a statement. An example is "It should be noted that . . ." An occasional well chosen emphatic, like an occasional intensive, will have the desired effect. But useless emphatics give the reader the impression that we are padding, that we are laboring to put our facts across, or that we are trying to convince ourselves.

. . . . . STRIVE FOR A COURTEOUS AND FRIENDLY TONE

One of the most important things in better letter writing is "tone." The question of tone gets to the question of how a letter sounds. Does it sound impertinent or tactless, or does it sound the way VA letters should—that is, courteous and friendly.

Writers may often become accustomed to certain phrases and sentences without realizing the jarring effect they produce on the reader. Here are a few examples—and how they may be perceived by our readers.

THE WORDS: You deserve no consideration.

TRANSLATION: If you want to be nasty we can play at that game to.

WHAT TO DO: Never reply to an unreasonable or offensive letter by adopting the same tone. This just starts a chain reaction. In addition, it doesn't do the job—that is, it doesn't give service.

THE WORDS: You claim that you did not receive the application.

TRANSLATION: You can't fool us. We know you received the application and promptly lost it.

WHAT TO DO: You have to send another application anyway, so why doubt the persons word?

SENSITIVE

THE WORDS: You misunderstood our letter.

TRANSLATION: Now these sentences are perfectly clear. You're ju[illegible] too dumb to understand them.

WHAT TO DO: Perhaps our letter was misunderstood, but it doesn't do any good to say so. Besides, if it was misunderstood, maybe it wasn't a good letter.

There are many other examples of jarring tone. You could probably think of your own translations to go with these–

- YOUR MISUNDERSTANDING OF OUR POLICY PROMPTS YOUR ACCUSATION THAT . . .
- MR. DOE, WHOM YOU RECOMMEND, IS NOT QUALIFIED . . .
- DO YOU ACTUALLY MEAN IT WHEN YOU SAY . . .
- YOU MUST SEND US THIS INFORMATION WITHOUT FAIL BY . . .
- WE DO NOT WISH TO COMPLY WITH YOUR REQUEST FOR . . .
- YOUR UNDATED LETTER . . .
- WE EXCEEDINGLY REGRET THE NECESSITY OF CALLING YOUR ATTENTION TO . . .
- YOU WILL UNDERSTAND AFTER FURTHER THOUGHT THAT WE CANNOT . . .
- WE MUST TELL YOU THAT YOU MAY DEFER PAYMENT UNTIL . . .
- YOUR LETTER WAS ADDRESSED TO THE WRONG OFFICE. WE DO NOT EMPLOY GEOLOGISTS.

It is not difficult to catch and correct examples of jarring tone, even before they are put on paper. Just keep alert at all times to the way your words sound.

You can keep this alertness by not assuming that words or sentences are satisfactory simply because they have been used many times before. Also, keep in mind the way you talk. You don't–and shouldn't–write exactly the way you talk. But, as much as possible, you should try to get into your letters the warmth and friendliness of your face-to-face conversations.

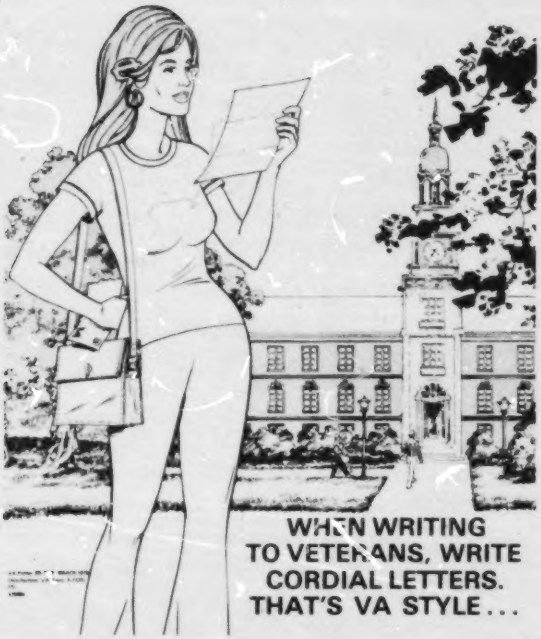
SENSITIVE

WHEN WE HAVE TO SAY "NO," . . .

we must be especially sensitive to the needs of our readers. There is little we can SAY that will make people HAPPY when we tell them that a claim for benefits has been disapproved. But by using the right TONE, we can SOFTEN the harshness of a disappointing "No." Our letters should show compassion and let our readers know that we care about them. Also, take time to first explain the circumstances and justify them so that our readers can understand.

SENSITIVE

feelings...



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PLANNING AND ORGANIZING A REPLY

A few minutes devoted to preparation will generally pay dividends–in the form of a shorter, better letter. Study the incoming letter carefully and think about these points.

- Consider who the reader is and what he or she needs to know.
- Try to understand the problem.
- How much does the reader already know?
- How will the reader use the information?
- How will the reader react?

Remember that the letter must–

- Attract the reader's attention.
- Create an interest in what you are trying to say.
- Convince the reader by supporting what you say.
- Cause the reader to take appropriate action.

In ORGANIZING your letter, you might like to–

- List the main points your letter will cover.
- Jot down under each point the key ideas relating to it.
- Put these points in proper sequence.
- Decide on the paragraph order.

Give careful attention to all parts of the letter; its

OPENING . . . . . BODY . . . . . CLOSING

A good *OPENING* should immediately stimulate the reader's interest. It should tell the reader what he or she wants to know. Help the reader get involved and feel that he or she is part of the letter. The best way to do this is to develop a "YOU ATTITUDE."

The *BODY* of the letter is your chance to put all those "guidelines" to work. It should convey your thoughts using a minimum of words. Be sure to provide all necessary details in a logical connected progression to the end. The letter should flow from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph. Think about what you planned your letter to do. It should do just that and nothing more. If you're answering an inquiry, be sure to answer it completely.

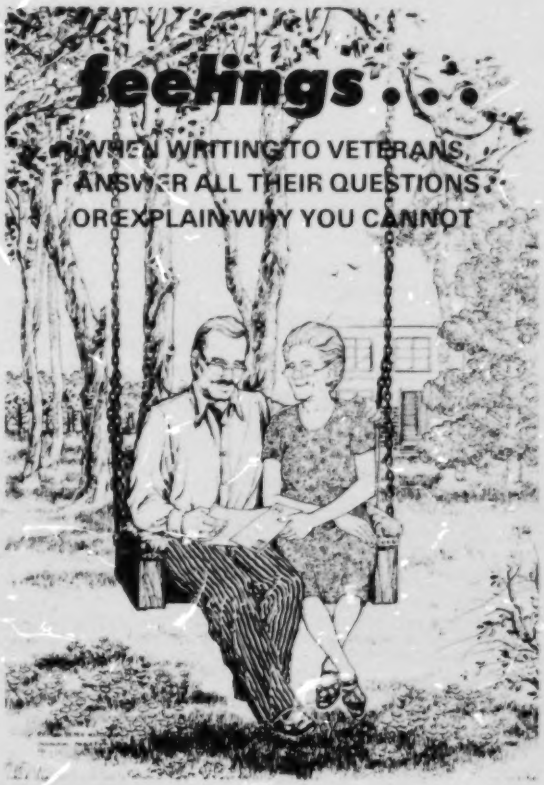
If a veteran is angry or confused, be sure to aim directly at the cause of annoyance and handle the matter tactfully.

Use "emphasis" to your advantage. You can highlight important points by—the positioning of words—by your use of punctuation (exclamation points, for example!)—by *underscoring*, CAPITALIZING etc. But use this technique on those "special" occasions. Don't overdo it.

* * * * * * * *

The *CLOSING* should summarize the content of the writing. It gives your letter a sense of completion. Make it clear. If it contains your recommendations, do not hedge. If you are making a request, state it clearly. If you are asking for information, tell the receiver exactly what you want to know. Your closing should either—

- Spell out a specific course of action for the reader to take . . . . .
- Sum up the preceding paragraphs . . . . .
- Include a statement building good will. Remember, again, to avoid negative words. Very often the last thing written is the first thing remembered.



IN SUMMARY

Most of us take great pride in the job we are doing—and rightfully so. We show veterans and other people that WE REALLY DO CARE by the many thoughtful things we do when we meet them—in elevators—in corridors—on the telephone—or in our work areas. It may be well to remind ourselves that we are "meeting" these same people when we write letters—even though we don't greet them "face-to-face." Your letters may already be showing that you care, by being written in sensitive, responsive and common sense language. But, as is the case in most things we do, there is always room for improvement. So why not try putting the ideas in this pamphlet to work for *better* letters!

IT'S SOMETHING YOUR READERS HAVE A RIGHT TO EXPECT,

IT'S PART OF YOUR JOB,

IT'S GOOD BUSINESS FOR DOING THE VA'S JOB,

IT'S ANOTHER WAY OF SAYING "VA. MAY I HELP YOU?"

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT? . . . . . .

"*feelings*"

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